STATEMENT OF PHILIP R. RECHT
DEPUTY ADMINISTRATOR
NATIONAL HIGHWAY TRAFFIC SAFETY ADMINISTRATION
BEFORE THE
SENATE COMMITTEE ON LABOR AND HUMAN RESOURCES
COLUMBUS, OHIO
REGARDING VARIOUS SCHOOL BUS SAFETY ISSUES

August 31, 1995

Senator DeWine, it is a pleasure to appear before you today to discuss and explore preventive measures that can be taken to make school bus transportation even safer than it is today. Accompanying me at the witness table is Ron Engle, Chief of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's (NHTSA) Safety Countermeasures Division, Office of Traffic Safety Programs. When I conclude, Mr. Engle will speak in detail about the issue of handrails on school buses.

NHTSA's principal mission is to reduce traffic crashes and the deaths and injuries that result from them. We do this by carrying out several statutory mandates. Under chapter 301 of title 49, United States Code, we issue Federal motor vehicle safety standards, carry out compliance and safety defect enforcement activities, conduct research and development, and provide consumer information. Under chapter 4 of title 23, United States Code, we lead the Nation's State and community highway safety program by establishing highway safety guidelines and setting priorities among them to assist State and local governments with the implementation of their highway safety programs. This statute also authorizes research, development and

demonstration projects, technical assistance, and formula and incentive grants.

On the matter of school bus safety, I should begin by mentioning that all experts agree that school buses are among the safest of all modes of transportation. About 400,000 public school buses throughout the Nation transport approximately 23 million students more than 18 million miles on every school day. Although our statistics show that children are safer on a school bus than on other modes of transportation, we continue to work to prevent school bus-related injuries and deaths.

Over the last 10 years, approximately 40 school children under 19 years old have been killed each year in school bus-related incidents as occupants in the bus or as pedestrians in the immediate vicinity of the bus. Specifically, since 1985 a total of 379 school children under 19 years old have been killed in these incidents: 101 while riding on the bus, and 278 as pedestrians.

In the last two years, we have seen an improvement in the statistics. In 1993, 37 children under 19 years old were killed in these incidents: 10 while riding on the bus and 27 as pedestrians. In 1994, 28 children under 19 years old were killed in these incidents: 2 while riding on the bus and 26 as pedestrians. Figures for 1995 are not yet available, so we do not yet know if the 1993 and 1994 experience was an aberration or

the start of a significant positive trend.

While a number of factors contribute to school bus incidents, our research and investigations generally indicate that children are at greater risk in school-bus loading zones than on board the buses. As a result, a major focus of NHTSA's school bus safety efforts concerns the immediate area around the bus.

Today's hearing involves just such an issue--the snagging of clothing or bookbag straps on stairwell handrails. This is a relatively small, yet tragic subset of the overall problem. This snagging problem has occurred when children are getting off a bus. As they walk past a handrail, strings or straps on the child's coat or backpack may lodge in the space between the handrail and the wall of the bus. When this occurs and the bus begins to drive away, the child may be dragged and run over by the rear wheels of the bus, leading to tragic, often fatal, injuries. Since April 1991, five children have been killed in this manner. The latest handrail snagging fatality occurred last February 27, when Brandie Browder, an eighth grader at Ferguson Jr. High School in Beaver Creek, Ohio, was coming home from school.

NHTSA is strongly committed to solving the problem of school bus handrail snagging and has taken aggressive steps to remedy the situation. Our activities have included recalls for

mechanical repairs such as redesigned handrails and rubber spacers that fit between the handrail and bus wall. Also, we have undertaken various educational efforts intended to get the message out that the mechanical repairs alone are not sufficient. Drivers, other adults, and the children themselves must recognize that extreme caution is absolutely necessary every time a child exits from a school bus. Mr. Engle will describe these matters in detail following my statement.

Let me devote the remainder of my time to describing NHTSA's other efforts directed at solving the loading zone problem. As with the handrail issue, our activities in this area involve both mechanical and educational components.

On the mechanical side, NHTSA issued two new rules during 1991 and 1992 for improving school bus safety. The rule issued in 1991 required stop signal arms on all new school buses built after September 1, 1992. This requirement is intended to reduce the number of students struck by vehicles illegally passing a stopped school bus.

The rule issued in 1992, amending the agency's safety standard for rear view mirrors, requires school buses manufactured after December 2, 1993, to be equipped with mirrors to give school bus drivers a clearer view of children approaching and leaving the bus. In practice, this requires school buses to be equipped with two types of outside mirror systems to increase

the ability of a driver to see children in the hazardous areas around the front and sides of the bus. One is the normal set of driving mirrors. The other is a pedestrian detection system of convex mirrors to reflect a wide angle. Together, these mirrors give drivers a broad, overlapping view of the bus's perimeter.

Currently, we are engaged in research on other systems involving more advanced technology. Specifically, the agency's Vehicle Research and Test Center (VRTC), located just 50 miles west of here in East Liberty, is conducting laboratory tests of school bus pedestrian detection systems that use radar to scan the area in front of and to the right of the bus and that alert the driver of any pedestrians in the vicinity.

In addition to the laboratory tests, we plan to observe the systems in actual use to determine how effectively they both detect school children and alert school bus drivers to potential problems. We have contacted the State of Ohio's Department of Education to mount these systems on working buses and conduct such an observation here in Ohio. We hope to have the entire study completed early in 1996.

On the behavioral or educational side, NHTSA's Traffic Safety Programs staff has developed a number of countermeasures addressing various school pedestrian and school bus safety issues. The most widely used is the *Willie Whistle* series, aimed at school children in grades K-8. A number of studies have shown

this program to be highly effective in teaching safe street-crossing behavior and reducing crashes involving young pedestrians.

NHTSA's newest pedestrian/education program, to be released tomorrow, September 1, is called "*Walk-Ride-Walk: Getting to School Safely.*" This program consists of seven half-hour lessons with teacher's guides, three student videos, a course poster identifying the danger zones around a school bus, and videos and brochures for parents and school bus drivers. The agency entered into a partnership with the National Safety Council (NSC) to market and distribute the "Walk-Ride-Walk: Getting to School Safely" program package at a reasonable cost. We believe that this combined effort of NHTSA and the Safety Council will greatly increase our ability to distribute a promising new product throughout the educational community.

In addition, three months ago Secretary Peña and Education Secretary Riley signed a "Statement of Commitment" agreeing that the two departments will develop coordinated policies in a number of areas, including issues related to the use of school buses. NHTSA has the lead in developing the Department of Transportation's plan for carrying out this commitment. This plan, which we will start drafting in September, will call for a wider distribution of information to students, parents, teachers, and administrators on safe behavior in and around school buses.

Let me conclude by indicating that most school bus-related tragedies can be prevented with more awareness of school bus hazards by students and caution on the part of the bus driver and other motorists. Having said that, let me especially emphasize the importance of school bus driver education to improve safety generally and specifically in addressing the problem of handrail snagging. School bus driver education is traditionally the responsibility of State and local governments. Nonetheless, we all have a part to play. As mentioned earlier, NHTSA is engaged in a variety of educational efforts, including providing technical assistance to the States for the development of their driver training programs. States must continue to enhance their programs and ensure that drivers remain vigilant. School boards and parents, in particular, must be made aware of the need for full and proper training of drivers, and make sure that we in government perform our responsibilities. We all share the responsibility to help our drivers safeguard our children.

Senator, this concludes my remarks. Mr. Engle will now discuss the handrail issue in further detail. We will then be glad to answer any questions that you may have.